

Civil War Book Review

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A Little History of the United States

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Review

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Davidson, James West *A Little History of the United States*. Yale University Press, \$25.00 ISBN 9780300181418

Bridging the Gap Between Popular and Professional History

James West Davidson's *A Little History of the United States* begins and ends with a call for his readers to consider two methods of making history—living it and writing it. He laments that the writing of history, hidden away in archives and libraries, is too often invisible to the general public doing the living of history. As an engaging and accessible survey of United States history, this book presents an admirable effort in bridging the gap between the public and historians.

At the center of Davidson's survey of American history is the nation's relationship with its twin ideals of freedom and equality. Though this relationship is often hypocritical and incomplete, the constant battle over who counts as equal and what freedoms are necessary is the cornerstone of the American story Davidson weaves. It is an ambitious theme for such a short book. With only 300 pages to cover 500 years, it may have been easier to write a history that focused only on elite leaders or a broad history of the masses. Yet Davidson carefully covers both the many contributions of powerful men and the powerful contributions of the many. By centering on how so many different Americans have struggled with freedom and equality, Davidson's work is multifaceted and multicultural without being scattered.

The greatest strength of *A Little History of the United States* is Davidson's prose. His ability to weave anecdotes and an accessible writing style into a clear and concise illustration of a cultural trend or political movement is enviable. The best examples lie in his retelling of the American Enlightenment and the Great Awakening. Framed around tales of Benjamin Franklin and Jonathan Edwards, the chapter distills the movements down to their core beliefs in a way that is easy to understand without being overly simplified. There is a natural rhythm to his

writing that guides the reader through the process of analyzing the impact of historical events and actors on the micro- and macroscopic levels.

Davidson's handling of such complex ideas might make this a tempting choice for a freshman or high school course. However, in this particular instance of writing history down, Davidson has left a critical part of history writing behind—his sources. Not a single citation or reference graces this work, making it impossible to recommend this book in any academic setting and difficult to recommend in general. Whether this was the choice of the author or the publisher, having no sources limits the credibility of the work. Source-less claims, such as a line about the Ming Dynasty mariner Admiral Zheng He discovering America, make the reader suspicious of the whole book.

For one to have a better chance of making history by living it, Davidson argues that we need to engage history already made, write it down, and read it. With so much of history education being shaped by politicians, it is critical for historians lead by example in breaking down the barriers, real and imagined, between the general public and the professional writing of history—writing that is well-sourced and believable. This book, with its engaging prose and deft explanations, should have been a book that helps with that.

Kristine Grinnis Isenhower teaches social studies in Prairieville, Louisiana. A specialist in secondary education with degrees from Vanderbilt University and Louisiana State University, she has taught courses on Louisiana History, American History, and World History.